

**Statement by John Harrison Sipe for the Virginia Department of Historic Resources Board for the  
Thursday, June 18, 2020 meeting in Richmond, VA**

Dear Board Members:

I am writing to voice my strong opposition to a marker for Charlotte Harris in Rockingham County, VA/Harrisonburg, VA.

I am the great grandson of Henry Emmanuel Sipe (1816-1891) and grandson of John Howard Sipe (1857-1950). I am John Harrison Sipe of Rockingham County (born 1929). I have relayed much of this story to the Rockingham County Board of Supervisors, but no one in the press or those working on the marker project have ever contacted me to learn the truth.

In a June 9<sup>th</sup> *Daily News Record* (Harrisonburg, VA) article, the first paragraph stated "Charlotte Harris, a local African-American woman, was abducted from the Harrisonburg-Rockingham County jail by a white mob and was lynched in 1878." I am very interested in knowing where in Harrisonburg this lynching took place, because it never happened in or near Harrisonburg, VA. I am the only living person that is well aware of the exact location to this day.

Being just eight years of age, I was not aware of who Charlotte Harris was when, by accident, I overheard two of my father's farm workers make a comment regarding a local hanging in the community. I asked my father that evening about what I overheard. He told me that there had been a hanging on his grandfather's farm, and it would be best to ask my grandfather. It was a few weeks later when visiting my grandfather, I finally got up the nerve to ask. He said yes there had been a horrible tragedy that occurred on the farm. He said when his father, my great grandfather, learned of this tragedy the morning it had occurred, he was mortified.

My grandfather began relating what had happened. He was only twenty (20) years old at the time. After the Civil War, his father had employed a black domestic worker named Charlotte Harris. Apparently, she was a very unpleasant woman and was not getting along well with the family. At one meal, the food tasted odd and was thrown outside to the dog who died shortly thereafter. The family felt Charlotte Harris had tried to poison them. She was let go of her job. But his father was unaware she planned to take revenge again on the family. She told Jim Argenbright, a young black boy, that she would put a spell on him if he did not set fire to Mr. Sipe's barn. Evidently, the boy believed her (superstitious acts were strongly believed by both white and black people in the late 1800s). The boy did burn the barn in the end of February of 1878.

The barn burning took place at nightfall. My grandfather said they had fed the horses and other livestock, and he and my great grandfather left to go to the house for supper. Jim was left in the barn to finish up the evening work and lock the stables. During supper, when looking out toward the barn, it was on fire. As they ran toward the barn, they discovered it had been set on fire in at least a dozen different places. My grandfather said the losses were very heavy including horses, cattle, grain, seed, flour, farm implements, and horse harnesses. This was the second time the barn was burned in twelve years as it had been burned by the Union Army during the Civil War.

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After some interrogation, the boy confessed to burning the barn and implicated Charlotte Harris for putting him up to setting the fires. He stated she would put a spell on him if he did not burn the barn.

In the meantime, Charlotte Harris had fled across the Blue Ridge Mountains to seek shelter with a relative. Several men left a day or two later crossing the mountains on horseback to Earlysville, VA seeking her out to bring her back to face justice. When she was located in the afternoon, she was returned late in the evening and taken immediately before a local magistrate for a hearing. The evidence was such that she was ordered to jail. However, when the hearing was over, it was late and the magistrate ordered her placed under guard by four men in a secure place – that being a blacksmith shop located on my great grandfather's farm (which no longer exists.) She was to be taken to jail the next morning.

When the family awakened the next morning, they learned of the horrible act that had happened during the night. My great grandfather and his family were horrified that she had been removed from the blacksmith shop during the night.

After my grandfather related this story, I kept asking my grandfather to show me where this took place. With great reluctance, he agreed but only if the subject would be closed afterwards. To my knowledge, it was never discussed in my presence again. The tree no longer stands.

Later it was learned Charlotte Harris had tried to poison the family who were her previous employers as well as threatening to burn the barn of another family. I know their names but do not wish to include.

In conclusion, in life there are horrible events that occur that you remember vividly – especially when you are very young. Each time when visiting the farm, as long as my grandfather remained the owner, it was always in the back of my mind. This is why I remember all the details so well.

I know many of you are very surprised that a great grandson of Henry Sipe is still living with good health and very sound memory. A couple things I learned in life is to be honest and to the best of your knowledge be sure of the accuracy of the facts.

I hope you will use this information and not approve a marker for Charlotte Harris.

John Harrison Sipe  
Rockingham, VA

P.S. You can go to the Library of Virginia to find articles beginning March 7, 1878 from the Rockingham Register and other newspapers. Some of the articles have correct information and others have untruths. This continues until this day.